

Kate Chopin's '*The Awakening*' and the Exploration of Feminine Desire and Expression

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Abstract— In '*The Awakening*', Kate Chopin introduces Edna Pontellier, the wife of a New Orleans businessman and as a mother of two children. Despite her conventional roles, Edna struggles with romantic feelings and sexual desires to gain her own independence. In search of true self and genuine desires of her own, Edna defies social conventions on her journey of self-discovery. Her previous submissive life is transformed into a radically subversive one. Her newly awakened feminine desires find expression in her paintings. Edna's desires and voice are powerful enough to overcome patriarchal culture and its expectations regarding women's role. Her paintings become her only subversive tool to inscribe her awakened desires. In the novel, Chopin implicitly suggests that feminine expression which is embodied in Edna's paintings is a necessary tool to free Edna from conventional roles as a mother or wife.

Key Words: Desire; Feminine Expression; Voice; Patriarchy; Identity;

1. Introduction

"*The Awakening*" has been celebrated as an early vision of woman's emancipation. The novel recounts a woman's abandonment of her family, her seduction, and her awakening to purely feminine desires and passions.

"*The Awakening*" brings up a wide range of feminist topics like women's right, women's independence, gender inequalities, women's freedoms and above all women's desire and language; it is this last concept that I will attend in this article.

The novel is the story of Edna Pontellier, a young wife and mother, who falls in love with the son of a friend while on vacation in Grand Isle, Louisiana. Edna Pontellier struggles between society's obligations and her own desires.

"*The Awakening*" was quite controversial when published in 1899; it disturbed critics and Chopin was ostracized immediately after its publication. Now it's considered a feminist landmark. Originally entitled "A Solitary Soul," the novel maps and portrays its twenty-eight-year-old protagonist, Edna, and how her desires are awakened in a patriarchal society. The novel centers upon a woman experimenting with her own sexual desires. The desires 'awakened' by Mrs. Pontellier together with her sexual experimentation aim at constructing a new identity other than the one prescribed in her patriarchal society.

2. Edna's Gradual Awakening

The beginning and end of the novel portray two possible facets of femininity. At the start of the novel, Edna seems to be the embodiment of conventional American ideals; she is twenty-eight, "married to a wealthy and attentive husband, the mother of two healthy children - from all appearances Edna Pontellier has everything to make a woman happy" (Rosowski 27). The reader is first introduced to Edna "through the eyes of her husband" (Toth 218), as Mrs. Pontellier, and then gradually "the narrator calls her 'Edna Pontellier' and finally 'Edna', while the character is 'becoming herself and casting aside that fictitious self which we assume like a garment with which to appear before the world'" (Toth 219).

Initially, Edna spends most of her time with her close friend Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle reminds Edna of her duties as a wife and mother. Adele serves somehow as Edna's double; although she is like Edna a woman/mother, she maintains this role well up to the end of the novel.

Edna believes that Adele has wasted herself by giving "her body over to her role as a mother-woman through her biyearly pregnancies" (Barker 132). Skaggs notes that Adele functions as a "patriarchal ideal of the submissive female who writes her history only through her family" (90). In order for Edna to move away from Adele's

maternal roles, she needs an alternative position to her traditional role as a mother-woman. Edna acquires this space only through finding her own voice and agency in her art. To find her own feminine expression in her art, Mademoiselle Reisz's presence is of utmost significance. Edna is tremendously moved by Reisz's music. Her "response to [Reisz's] music is certainly sexual" (Cutter 94); "but what Edna awakens to through Mademoiselle Reisz's playing is not a specific sexual desire, directed to or at something, but rather an understanding of how much her desire has been repressed" (Cutter 94). Edna needs a woman not in a traditional role but someone to function "as Edna's artistic mentor" (White 72). Reisz "counsels Edna on more than one occasion that genuine art demands courage, words that Edna internalizes" (White 72). The narrator refers to the idea that her thoughts up until this moment of music have all been leading to a realization of her own freedom and where her happiness lies. This musical experience encourages her to finally swim for the first time which leads to her powerful first awakening. Like when she hears the music on the piano, her mind becomes free of its usual patterns and she is allowed to use her brain to maximum capacity and revel in her newfound sense of freedom. Under Reisz's influence, Edna attempts to find her own genuine feminine essence which is embodied in her paintings later.

3. Edna's Feminine Desires and Expression

Edna's experiment with her painting becomes a vehicle to express her feminine side for the first time. It is striking to note that Edna's painting subject is Adele. She chooses a maternal subject for her painting. Edna's awakening is in part prompted by the aesthetic, sexual, and social issues she confronts in attempting to paint Adele. (Barker 122)

Edna ambivalently desires to connect with a maternal figure in her painting while at the same time struggles to abandon her maternal roles. This desire, Barker argues, "corresponds to [Julia] Kristeva's 'homosexual-maternal aspect' - an identification with the mother in which the realm of the semiotic prevails" (134). As Edna paints Adele: "A subtle current of desire passed through her body, weakening her hold upon the brushes and making her eyes burn" (Chopin 17). This idea of homosexual desires being awakened is supported by the fact that, in the painting scene, "Edna's desire is directed toward Adele, not Robert" (Barker 134).

However, I argue that Edna undergoes a process throughout the novel which moves her from Lacanian symbolic towards Kristevan semiotic. The persistent desire to return to and merge with the maternal is displayed through her painting topic which is a maternal topic. Her final resolution to symbolically merge and become one with the maternal ocean is her last indication of return to the maternal and the semiotic.

Edna's paintings become her only subversive tool to inscribe her awakened desires. As Cutter rightly notes Mrs. Pontellier "seeks voice in her painting" (Cutter 95). In the

novel, Chopin implicitly suggests that feminine expression which is embodied in Edna's paintings is a necessary tool to free women from their conventional roles as mother or wife.

In a climactic scene Edna decides to leave her home and family. She is "oppressed by culture forces that she does not understand" (Gray 1). She longs to have her own desire and her own room; to this end she begins to sell her paintings in order to be able to pursue her adventures.

Edna's process of self-discovery in *The Awakening* is a multilayered process. She is initially torn between her desires to explore herself and her desires more fully and the realities of her present life. After realizing the discrepancy between the harsh patriarchal realities of her life and the life she has been awakened to she begins to shed her identity as a typical "mother-woman" and begins to develop her interests and desires more fully. To this end, she leaves her house and husband in order to have a room of her own and this in turn leads to Edna's desires of her own which engages her in an affair through which she can explore herself sexually as well as artistically.

Here Edna's affair with Alcee is the most socially observable act of her resistance and freedom. Now she is able to explore her repressed sexuality in a setting that allows her to be free and this leads to her understanding of herself as a female and sexual being. More importantly than this, however, is the house itself as a symbol of her freedom and new awakening to herself. Moving to a room of her own completes the first stage of her journey. In such a room she is free to explore her sexuality and creativity. In essence, it is a place where she can live out her forbidden fantasies.

After Edna gains some independence, she begins to leave her maternal and social duties. She starts to isolate herself from New Orleans society and withdraw from some of the duties traditionally associated with motherhood. Edna in a room of her own is able to "fully make the transition from amateur to professional artist, establishing her studio on her own, a transition that coincides with her awakening" (White 76). For Edna Pontellier independence and solitude are almost inseparable.

Before attempting to have her own voice in her paintings, Edna was not able to experience individual expression or independence.

Expected to perform their domestic duties and responsibilities for the health and happiness of their families, Victorian women were prevented from seeking the satisfaction of their own needs and desires. During her gradual awakening, Edna discovers her own identity and acknowledges her emotional and sexual desires.

When she swims for the first time, she discovers her own strength, and through her pursuit of her painting she is reminded of the pleasure of individual expression and desire. However, Edna's feminine voice and expression is juxtaposed with the male characters' phallogocentric language.

Edna's desires and voice are powerful enough to overcome patriarchal culture and its expectations regarding

women's role. Edna now is not under the control of her husband. She simply awakens her long repressed desires and then pursues them.

4. The Final Scene

In the final scene Edna sees the touch of the ocean as "sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace" (Chopin 113). Many critics so far have interpreted the novel's final scene as Edna's suicide. Gray argues that Edna escapes oppressive ideology, but tragically, does so only in death (Gray 4). Le Marquand argues that Edna's choice of drowning in the ocean as a method of death could be seen as representational of her 'homosexual desires', as outlined by Kristeva; mainly, however, it should be seen as the attempt to escape a world she cannot exist in, a world in which "man is subject and the absolute - woman is but 'other'" (5).

While Edna swims out farther and farther, she thinks "of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her, body and soul" (Chopin 114).

The only alternative left to Edna in her newly found life to escape her responsibilities as a wife and mother is to abandon it completely. In many senses, Edna's final gesture is the result of her final awakening.

As I said there is extensive critical controversy regarding the ending of Chopin's novel. One group of critics focuses on the novel as a feminist text. They argue that Edna Pontellier's awakening leads to her suicide which is a triumphant act. By committing suicide Edna is finally freeing herself from social constraints. Her suicide is an act of liberation and emancipation, therefore Edna is the ultimate feminist. The opposing group of critics read the novel as a naturalist text. They believe Edna's awakening to be a decline into insanity. Instead of triumphing against the society and men who oppress her, Edna gives herself up to the ocean in a symbolic return to the womb, allowing the ocean to possess her. While there is evidence to support both arguments, my argument lies in between these two views. I read Edna's return to the sea not as a suicide but as a return to genuine feminine qualities and desires.

The novel ends with Edna allowing herself to be overtaken by the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. In this scene, Edna reenters the sea, the original place of her self-understanding, in an attempt to drown herself in her newly awakened desires. I argue that Edna's final returning to the sea is a very symbolic scene and should not be interpreted literally. She finally decides not to return to the restrictive realm of patriarchal society by seeking refuge in the maternal realm of the sea. Drowning here means drowning and indulging oneself in exquisite feminine desires.

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